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House Rejects Republican Effort to Free Military Aid to Contras From Money Bill

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WASHINGTON — The House, turning back a Republican bid to expedite military aid to Nicaraguan insurgents, rejected an effort to separate the issue from a controversial \$1.7 billion spending bill.

The 212-208 roll call in the Democratic-controlled chamber upheld procedural requirements that are likely to delay aid to the anti-Sandinista guerrillas. The action reflects divisions within Congress over both the president's support for the rebels and his broader efforts to control the domestic budget agenda.

Though the administration is expected to win resumed military aid, the debate over Nicaragua has taken an increasingly partisan tone as the House Democratic leadership has sought to wield its power in response to bitter rhetoric from the White House.

The president's request for \$100 million in new aid has become interwoven with domestic budget priorities, and the procedures adopted yesterday thrust the issue into the context of competing domestic appropriations.

(In Nicaragua, meanwhile, a random sampling of residents finds that Nicaraguan opinions of the U.S. vary as widely as American views of Nicaragua.)

Linked to Earlier Votes

The background to the current debate is a series of votes last month by both houses of Congress on the same Nicaragua question. The House rejected the president's request then, but after making modifications, the administration narrowly prevailed a week later in the Republican-controlled Senate.

The Senate-passed proposal to help the anti-Communist guerrillas will be considered by the House as a companion measure to the spending bill. The key vote will come today, on a proposal by moderate Democrats to further restrict the administration's use of the \$100 million. Under this proposal, as much as \$25 million in aid for non-lethal purposes would be made immediately available, but the release of any funds for arms or other lethal assistance would require another vote by both houses this summer.

This approach seeks to pressure the president to pursue negotiations first with the Sandinista government in Managua. But the maneuvering since the first vote nearly five weeks ago has deepened the partisan split in the chamber.

The GOP leadership failed to win the support of 16 Republican members at that time. It is considered certain to cut that number today in what many expect to be another close vote.

Bitter Party Clash

Yesterday's debate was marked by frequently bitter rhetoric, and in an unusual step, the GOP leadership sought to effectively take control of the rules process under which the matter will be debated. A similar tactic was successful in the 1981 budget debate but is rarely used and symbolizes the most direct confrontation between the two parties.

By a 221-202 margin, the Democratic leadership prevailed, while losing 27 conservatives from its own ranks. The rule setting the terms for debate was adopted in the still closer 212-208 roll call.

In both cases, the GOP lost only one of its members—Illinois Rep. John Porter on the first vote and New York Rep. Bill Green on the second. If similar unity is maintained today, the minority party could prevail.

The administration has repeatedly warned it will veto the underlying appropriations bill, but the measure includes funds sought by the president for the Internal Revenue Service and for security measures at U.S. embassies. For this reason, it isn't regarded as certain that the legislation is doomed. A year ago, the president made concessions on domestic priorities when a similar bill was used to resume non-lethal assistance to the Nicaraguan Contras.

Harbor-Mining Disclosures

U.S. involvement in the Nicaraguan conflict began in early 1981, but the House cut off aid three years later after disclosures of the Central Intelligence Agency's role in the mining of Nicaraguan harbors. While quietly encouraging private financing for the Contras, the administration has also sought to regain a central role, first by winning non-lethal aid for the insurgents a year ago and now by pursuing a major increase in U.S. arms aid and training.

"What you have done with this procedure is kill aid to the Contras," said House Minority Leader Robert Michel. The Illinois Republican said Democrats had "housed" the issue in a bill he derided as "a pork palace."

Many Democrats also are reluctant to having the two issues connected, but the administration's harsh rhetoric against its opponents on Nicaragua and its hard line on budget matters have cut into its support.

"They want to fund the Contras but not the combines," said Rep. Tony Coelho (D., Calif.), alluding to the administration's stand on some measures aimed at aiding agriculture. And although Speaker Thomas O'Neill (D., Mass.) is the president's frequent target, it is the new generation of leaders such as Mr. Coelho who often seem most upset with the tactics used by the White House.